

Write Like a House Afire **Meditative Writing Practice and Healthy Communities**

“During sessions of solitude, periods of silence . . . we shun life’s chattering distractions and simply notice what’s left: ourselves.” --Helen Cordes

“Paula Marie Coomer writes like a house afire . . .”

That independent clause is from a blurb written for my novel *Dove Creek* by Kentucky writer Ed McClanahan, one of the 1960s enclave of Merry Pranksters which also included Ken Kesey, Tom Wolfe, Larry McMurtry, a bus called Furthur, and a little phenomenon involving Kool-aid. I was child of the '70s, hence these exciting folks were a week or two before my time, but I was crazy-enthralled with just about everything they were doing, astute pre-adolescent that I was, and thanks to televised news and *Life* magazine. I mention them here not to be name dropping, but to provide history for how Write Like a House Afire started.

Ed is one of those people who will do just about anything within his power to help a person, so asking him to write a blurb for my little book—however intimidating—was low-risk. What I wasn’t expecting was that his words would later launch a movement in my life. A movement that brought me around to understanding once and for all that fame is not what writing is about. Not even close. What writing *is* about is the effect the practice of it has on the day-to-day: it requires a person to sit still and focus. Science has long ago proven that meditation increases health by improving overall immune function and reducing stress. Recent research on electrical conduction in the brain has proven that writing by hand has the same effect on a human as meditation.

From my nursing education, I know that the body has a particular response to pain and injury—it rushes all kinds of healing warriors like blood and lymph to the spot of injury. Chemicals and neurotransmitters get released. When you dredge up pain by writing about it, the body rushes healing energy to the spot where the pain is stored. If you’ve ever gotten a massage, and for unexplained reasons began crying, you have experienced the phenomenon of painful memories stored in nerve endings in the back.

It makes sense to me then, that writing to rid the body of stored-up inner gunk might initiate a kind of healing process, a restoration of our scarred selves such that we begin to tick just that much more efficiently. Anyone who has written a memoir about life difficulties will testify: writing is a way of getting bad stuff out of the body.

All of which is to say, when I read those words, “writes like a house afire,” a spark of awareness was born. I was at what you might call a dull spot in my existence. A book I had spent fifteen years writing and had grown so disgusted with I’d stashed in the closet had been pulled out at the bidding of a friend who produced a small radio show in Moscow, Idaho. She’d overseen the recording and serialization of it, broadcast it in thirteen episodes over independent radio, and the darn thing was being downloaded from the radio station’s website at a rate of several hundred episodes a month.

Still, it seemed sudden in the wake of all those years when eighteen months later this publisher in Seattle wanted to bind it, put a cover on it, and see how much further it would fly. He expected it to fly high and wide, actually. *Tremendous commercial potential* was the phrase the book marketing manager spoke into my ear over the phone.

It didn't even flinch a feather, as it turns out. Not even after having been a featured title at the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association 2011 Fall Tradeshow in Portland. And so, the fatal day when I sat there staring at the back cover of my novel reading those words "writes like a house afire," wondering, *why? Why, why, why, why, why?*

Waiting all that time to have something happen and then to have it be a non-happening can turn even a strong woman into a blue, shivering pile of nothing. Of course, as anyone who has lived more than a few decades on this planet knows, the best cure for having become a blue, shivering pile of nothing is to **get up and do something for somebody else**.

Which is exactly what came to mind, sitting there in my homey living room, with its wood floors, array of colorful rugs, and sunlight shining through so many windows. Dust motes. I remember looking up and seeing not the sunshine, but the dust motes.

"That's you," the little red devil on my one shoulder said, "always seeing the negative."

Of course, you know that's when the little angel on the other shoulder waved her magic wand and those words snapped back at me: *Paula Marie Coomer writes like a house afire*.

Writes like a house afire.

That little episode was also precipitated by my having given a presentation titled, "The Role of Perseverance: How to Stay True to the Writer Within for the Write on the Sound writers' conference in Edmonds, Washington, at which the keynote speaker had been Natalie Goldberg. You may recognize Natalie Goldberg as the author of *Writing Down the Bones*, a classic book about Natalie's Zen practice and also an instructional guide to establishing the writing habit by approaching writing in the same way you approach meditation: as a *practice*, a component of your daily living, not a means to an end.

It's the same way as a kid I was trained to read the Bible: a few verses each day. And the same way we are trained to approach dieting and exercise. None of which I'm very good at.

So, in typical *assemblage* artist fashion—I believe writers are nothing if not *assemblage* artists—I merged these occurrences and personal failures into an idea that I thought might benefit others in my somewhat culturally-barren town. I would start a writing-as-meditation group.

So I called the Arts and Entertainment editor at the Lewiston Tribune, and she ran a few paragraphs about my little event. I tried to sabotage myself by calling her at the last minute, thinking she wouldn't be able to squeeze it in, but she did. Two days before the first session.

I prepared a few materials, hoping no one would show up so I could go home and forget about the whole thing. What I did not expect that first night was thirteen people. Thirteen! And what I certainly did not expect was that they would keep coming. And what I *really* did not expect was that a year later we would still be going, and that one woman would pull out of the dregs an entire poetry manuscript about her heart transplant, complete it, decide to self-publish it, and have it endorsed by nationally-known members of the medical community. What I also didn't know is that another woman would produce such staggeringly beautiful works of poetry that I would find myself insisting, begging for her to start sending them out to be published and to think about collecting her work into a book of her own.

What I also did not expect was to fall in love, with a rag-tag team of retired folks, homeless, people, one diagnosed schizophrenic, and that fireball of a 70-something who is walking around with a zippered chest and the borrowed heart of a 25-year-old extreme motorcyclist. We'd be perfect cast in a movie.

In the center of us was this thing, this idea, that leaving our cell phones and our computers at home and gathering for an hour to put pen to paper for no other reason than the joy it brings is **healthy** and happy-making, and by extension, making us better members of our families and our communities. We are now to the point where we can cry when we need to, tease about our foibles, miss a class or show up late without apologizing. One man, who started out homeless, got a job, bought a car, changed his eating habits and lost weight decided to follow a dream of actually being a full-time writer, moving to another city where he thought he could find the kind of employment he enjoys so he could hopefully make that happen. Another man at this time is off again on one of his homeless "vacations," as he calls them. We miss him, but we know when he comes back he'll bring an entirely new set of great stories. He'll be ready to write like a house afire again.

How to Start Your Own Write Like a House Afire Group

I realized I wanted to spread the word about the way we'd set up our writing practice group and to create a group of materials to make available for communities. I had a vision of Write Like a House Afire groups popping up all over the country, changing the way people live. I've been so troubled by the way computers and I-phones have affected people. In my own life, I've lost touch with dozens of folks, simply because they no longer telephone: they text, and I don't. I've watched people become weirdly twitchy when they have to stand and engage in a conversation. Where acquaintances used to stop and chat, they now grunt or wave while texting someone on their phones. I used to have to unplug my telephone at home so I could work. Now it never rings. Maybe I'm the one who has changed, but I don't think so. There is an excellent book called *Sight and Sensibility* by Laura Sewell about the relationship between the way we use our eyes and addiction and depression. What her research has shown is that the eye is in its relaxed state when we are looking out at the horizon. Presumably we evolved this way from watching the horizon for prey and enemies. When we do close work—which in the case of our ancestors would have meant butchering a kill, or gathering food, or engaging in hand-to-hand combat—our bodies release a little dose of adrenalin. So all that close-up computer work and texting—even reading a book does this—causes our bodies to release adrenalin.

So. Junkies. The marketers finally found a way to make junkies of all of us. Even now, typing this, I wonder how many people will snatch glimpses at their phones while in attendance at this workshop.

I see the negative impacts every day in my classes at the university. Students are so addicted, they cannot go for more than a few minutes without looking at their phones. Their attention spans are 140 characters long. Many of have not developed the ability to think critically, in part, I believe, because their imaginations are atrophied. I have to insist they take notes by hand because of the negative impact of computer-note-taking on grades. Learning requires the engagement of the senses. Tapping into a computer does not engage the neurological system in the same way as writing by hand.

What is even worse, perhaps, is the level of dishonesty that is exhibited since many of us have instituted stringent policies that prohibit the use of electronic devices in classrooms. Students attempt to hide them so they can glimpse at them every few minutes. If you've ever stood in front of a crowd of people, you know you see every movement, every twitch of the brow, every sigh, every time a finger reaches for a text message. We are back to grandma's candy dish, stealing her candy instead of asking for it.

The handouts you are receiving today is my first attempt to cluster materials together. You are welcome to photocopy and use the information and prompts I've provided, I only ask that you include the little ™ next to the title *Write Like a House Afire*. I hope you will take this information back to your communities and to start your own Write Like a House Afire group. You don't have to be an established writer to initiate one. And you don't have to discover poetic geniuses. But I do hope you take those few moments of time when you engage pen and paper to remember what it is like to be a pure human and not to be dependent on machines. And I hope you will write me a letter and tell me all about it, put a stamp on the envelope and send it off in the mail to Paula Marie Coomer, 1117 7th St., Clarkston, WA 99403.

How to Write Like a House Afire

1. Keep writing. Don't edit, rephrase, rethink. Keep the pen or pencil moving. If you can't think of what to write, write the words *write like a house afire*—or any appealing word or phrase—over and over until a new thought comes out of your pen or pencil—and it should feel like that, like it's coming straight out of the pen.
2. Trust your pen. Go for the first image that appears.
3. Don't judge your writing. Don't compare, analyze, criticize.
4. Let your writing find its own form. Allow it to organically take shape into a story, an essay, a poem, a dialogue, or a complete meander.
5. Don't worry about the rules. Don't worry about grammar, syntax, punctuation, or sentence structure.
6. Let go of expectations. Let your writing surprise you.
7. Kiss your frogs. Remember, this is just practice. Not every session will be magic. The point is to just suit up and show up at the page, no matter what.

8. Tell the truth. Be willing to go to the scary places that make your hand tremble. Be willing to tell your secrets.
9. Write specific details. The truth isn't in the facts; it's in the details.
10. Write what matters. Care about what you are writing. Be passionate but kind to your writing.
11. Read your writing after you've finished. You'll find out what you've written, what you care about, when you're writing the truth, and when the writing is working.
12. Date your pages and write the topic at the top. This will keep you grounded in the present and help you reference pieces you might want to use in something else.

From *The Writer's Retreat Kit: A Guide for Creative Exploration & Personal Expression* by Judy Reeves.

One month prior to Session 1:

- Practice all the exercises yourself, at least a few of them.
- Find a quiet, feel-good place to hold your sessions. Coffee shops, restaurant meeting rooms, the library, a church basement. We started calling ourselves the boll weevils because we keep asking for special arrangements at cafes and restaurants, but we don't spend enough money to satisfy the folks who own the places, so they very politely ask us to find another place. Rule #1: Don't ask a business owner to stay open for you. Rule #2: Find a place that offers space without expectations. Don't use someone's home as homes impose too much responsibility on the host. We finally settled on the commons at our local state college. It gets a little noisy, and we miss not being able to order a cup of tea, but we are expecting to get creative and start bringing a Thermos.
- Write a press release for the arts and entertainment editor at your local newspaper and for local radio and TV shows. Most of news agencies and newspapers make public service announcements for free.
- Make sure your press release states the time, date, and place of your first meeting. Be sure to specify that folks should **leave their cell phones and computers at home—not just turned off, but at home or in the car**. Even at this I had people show up with laptops that first session. I hated to embarrass them by asking them to put them away, but I did. They never returned after that first session, which was perhaps a good thing. Remind people to think of the sessions as mini retreats. The idea is to detach from technology for ninety minutes every couple of weeks. Two hours max.
- Ask people to bring a notebook and pen. I encourage people after the first meeting to buy a favorite journal and pen. I take my favorites to show them what exists. Many people have never gone shopping for a favorite journal and pen. I tell them to look for them at bookstores. Bookstores have lots of cool items for writing. They also have books!
- Run your press release once a week for several weeks prior to the first meeting. You may have to resubmit it to whatever news agency you are using. You also may have to follow up once it's submitted.
- Do not charge people to attend group. One of the conditions of using Write Like a House Afire materials is that the program is that it has to be free. Always and forever.
- Plan for 6 session 2 weeks apart. Make sure the sessions are at the same time and place. Provide people with a schedule. I believe we've lost some people just because we've had to move so often. People need dependability.

Session 1:

- The first session begins with an introduction to the Write Like a House Afire philosophies. You are welcome to read or copy the first four pages of this handout. Maybe you'll want to state things in your own words. Whichever way you choose, do explain to people why it is so important to leave their little machines at home.
- Bring crayons—a box of 100 will serve in most cases—and some drawing paper.
- Bring your own journal and a favorite pen.
- If you have them, bring an array of journals to show all the cool and different types.
- Bring a kitchen bell timer.
- Explain to people that this first session is about getting in touch with their inner kindergartner. One of the best ways to get people to relax is to give them a box of crayons and ask them to draw. Another is to give them Play-doh. It has to do with the way smell and small motor activity triggers memory.
- Ask people to draw the very first house they can remember having lived in. I've had people cry while doing this exercise, so you might also want to have Kleenex on hand. It helps to play some kind of soothing music in the background. The kind they play when you are getting a massage, interestingly enough. Tell them to include as much detail as possible. Remind them that they don't have to be artists. No one is going to see this work but them. Ideally, you'd have enough space to allow people to spread out. Ask folks to sit silently motionless until everyone is done. Ask them to respect other attendees' process. Explain that the experience can be emotional. Give people plenty of time: 20-30 minutes. Don't speak until everyone has finished. If people are having too much trouble emotionally, allow them to simply sit silently until everyone is finished. Be sure to explain all these things before folks start.
- Once everyone has laid down their crayons, and it is clear everyone is finished, ask them to open their notebooks and journals and to *write like a house afire*—meaning write for 10 minutes without stopping or lifting their pens—about their memories of that first home. Instruct them that they should not worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, paragraphs, or even making sense. Remind them that no one is ever going to see this but them, unless they choose to share it. Tell them that if they can't think of what to write or if they get stuck, they should simply write over and over again the word *house* until a new thought comes. The idea is to be in a relaxed state, but to move the pen or pencil continuously, so as to quiet the analytical part of the brain, which is the part that is always working so hard in our dog-eat-dog world. It's the part that keeps us awake at night, worrying. Writing the same words over and over again turns the work into a mantra, which is an eons-old way of getting that over-wrought part of our brains to take a break. Mantra is also a way of engaging with our spirits and with the universal life force, that thing we also call God.
- At the end of 10 minutes, ask people to stretch in place, lifting their hands, flexing their feet and legs.
- Then ask them to write for 10 minutes about the process in which they just engaged—and with the same instructions as before: if they can't think of what to write to simply write the single-word prompt "house" over and over again until a new thought comes. Ask

them to listen to their bodies, to note any feelings in their abdomen or chest, tingling in their extremities, etc.

- Then ask if anyone wants to read what they wrote or to talk about the session. Allow people to talk as long as they would like. Answer questions about the process as best you can based on the information provided in the handouts. If no one does, end the session, remind them of the next one, explain a little about the format as listed in Session 2, then dismiss the class.

Session 2-6:

- Start each session with a 10 minute writing “flush.” This is when we write out all of our frustrations, disappointments—whatever negative things have plagued us since the last session. Again, instruct people to not stop moving the pen and to rewrite the single-word prompt “flush” over and over like mantra if they can’t think of anything to say. It is interesting to know that when we started our group I used to write furiously and with a bit of anger during this part. Now I end up writing about all the good things that are happening in my life.
- After the end of the “flush,” give people a chance to chat a bit. We have been meeting long enough that we like to catch up on each other’s news. Don’t let this run too long. Five to 10 minutes should be a maximum.
- Then begin a series of three 5-minute writes to a single-word prompt. Give the prompt, set the bell timer for 5 minutes and begin to write, always with the instructions to use the prompt as a mantra if they cannot think of something to write. At the bell, give the next prompt and reset the timer. Continue for the third prompt.
- Here is a list of single-word prompts in the order we used them in our group, but you can devise your own: pink, cabbage, road, broken, start, pincers, cabbage, river, extreme, purpose, oatmeal, red, sky, belly, greatness.
- Ask for volunteers to read their writing. I have never had a session where no one wanted to read.
- And that’s it. The end of the session.
- A week or so before Session 6, send out another press release. Group members have come to call this “bringing in new blood.” I prefer to call it, “rearranging the molecules.”

Session 7:

- Repeat session 1.
- You can vary the drawing component by having people draw either themselves or a tree. There is a psychological test that involves these things, but we don’t have to go into the details here. Suffice it to say drawing a house, a tree, or the self, nicks at aspects of the deep subconscious. It’s a good idea to vary the drawing component for the sake of those who stay on for the repeat series of sessions. It’s also interesting for people to repeat renderings of each of those things, too, because of the way writing practice changes their recall and perception. If you have them draw themselves, then, obviously, they have to write about the self they drew. If you have them draw a tree, tell them to draw a tree that stands out in their memory for some reason. For the writing component, have them write about what it is that makes that tree stand out for them.

Session 8-12:

- Repeat session 2-6.
- Additional one-word prompts: briefcase, tequila, excitement, stealing, bouquet, simplicity, mangoes, chocolate, table, petunia, selling, appointment, detail, doctor, intelligent, meaning, placemat

Session 13:

- Repeat session 1.

Session 14-18:

- Repeat session 2-6
- Additional one-word prompts: exquisite, clean, carport, lawn, drive-in, rocks, swim, standard, aspen, consequence, lemonade, honest, earring, upstairs, ticket
- At this point, folks who have been in the first two series of sessions will start to get a bit restless, I think because their inner writing beasts have been unleashed. So, advise them that you will be adding a new component called an “extended writing prompt.” You may want to reduce the three 5-minute prompts to two to offset the additional time required for the addition of the longer prompt.
- You can decide how long you want the longer prompts to go. We write for 20 minutes. That may be too long for some folks, so remind them to use the prompt as a mantra to keep their pen or pencil moving.
- Here are some prompts we have used, plus a few extras, but you can make up your own, or consult some of the resources on the list I’ve included:
 - A dead end
 - Summers, growing up
 - Sitting in the back seat of a car
 - Ordering room service
 - Cleaning out an old shed
 - Finding money
 - Suffering a great loss
 - Destroying something
 - Telling a lie
 - Getting hair dyed, permed, or shaved off
 - Roller skating
 - Cutting grass
 - Abstaining and hating it
 - Overindulging and loving it
 - Fear of _____?
 - Being challenged by weather
 - Being in debt—financially or otherwise
 - All-consuming passion—yours or someone else’s
 - Breaking a promise
 - Making a promise

Session 19:

- Repeat session 13.

Session 20-24:

- Repeat session 14-18.
- More single-word prompts: seven, helicopter, recent, gourmet, judgment, belt, sister, sinister, equation, blue, romance, eventually, crazy, humid, jackrabbit.

Assuming you take a break for a holiday here and there, this should bring you to the end of a year. We are just starting our second year, so tips for running the second year will have to wait awhile. I will tell you, however, that our extended prompts are now being handed out as “assignments,” meaning people are writing at home and bringing in copies of their writing for us all to read and discuss. We’ve had a few “formal” sessions here and there, where I’ve talked about specific things such as line and meter in poetry, character formation, recurring themes, and how to use the elements of fiction in non-fiction writing. If you’d like to include some of these, I’d suggest consulting some of the resources I’ve included, or inviting area writers to speak to your group, but always make these an addendum to the session or perhaps the focus of a special meeting. Never fail to include the writing-as-meditation practice first and strive not to get off-schedule.

In the meantime, I hope you do go home and start your own Write Like a House Afire group. I can attest that ours has changed each of us just a bit, and some of us a great deal. Either way, I wish everyone the best of all life has to offer and hope you put down your phones and computers once in a while to remember what the world was like *before*.